

High, Low, and Modern

Some Thoughts on Popular Culture and Popular Government

RIMBAUD was unquestionably a great poet. But was he a highbrow? He would generally be so classified today—and yet, the more one considers the matter, the odder it looks. His contemporaries—even his admiring ones, to say nothing of his depreciators—certainly did not see anything “high” about this adventurer-bohemian who experimented with vice as energetically as with poetic forms. He himself would have been more than a little astonished at the description. “High” was where the *Académie Française* was located; Rimbaud was somewhere below, roaming among the cities of the plain.

The term itself, “highbrow,” was first publicised in Van Wyck Brooks’ historic essay, *America’s Coming-of-Age*, which appeared in 1915. It is worth remembering that this essay was by way of being a manifesto of “the modern” in literature and art, and that it was, among other things, an *attack* on the highbrow. By this term, Brooks meant the American equivalent of the French Academy—the “genteel tradition” of letters represented by the New England “Brahmins”: Longfellow, Emerson, Lowell,

Howells, Aldrich, and co. “Highbrow” culture was “high” culture, that dominating influence on American letters which placed the greatest emphasis, not on creativity itself, but on (1) the continuity of a cultural tradition and (2) the moral role played by art and the artist in the nation’s life.

The young moderns, as we know, rejected this notion of cultural statesmanship. They were heirs to a literary tradition only in the sense that it was, in fact, their property—but this property could be used or abused at their pleasure, for they recognised no obligation to it. And they utterly rejected the idea that they were, in any sense, guardians of public morality. This morality wore a Victorian aspect; and so far from preserving it, the young moderns set out to subvert it by every means at their command. It was not, of course, that they—the majority at any rate—were against morality *per se*. What they wanted was to enlarge the moral sense so as to bring into the lives of men (and the arts of men), a freedom, an irreverence, an uninhibitedness, a candour (especially in matters of sex) that had hitherto been lacking.

And no one can say they have not succeeded.

This article, brief excerpts of which have appeared in the press, is the full text of the paper recently presented for discussion to the Congress for Cultural Freedom’s tenth anniversary conference in Berlin.

JUST AS THERE IS A DISTINCTION to be made between “highbrow” culture, properly speaking, and the “modern” movement which replaced it, so is there a distinction to be made between the “popular culture” of the last

century and the "mass culture" of our own.

In the beginning there was only Culture, as defined by tradition and authority. There was never any ambiguity as to who had Culture and who did not—it was entirely a matter of education (though sometimes of self-education). Nor was there any doubt as to who had more or less of it: a man who knew Greek and Hebrew as well as Latin was more Cultured than one who merely knew Latin. Popularisations of this Culture were sometimes provided for the improvement of the uneducated; but not very often.

The uneducated had their entertainments and diversions—singing, dancing, cock-fighting, drinking, fornication, and an occasional festivity at the church. Existing as they did without benefit of anthropology, it never occurred to them or anyone else that this kind of thing could be regarded as Culture, or even as a Sub-culture. But with the spread of printing and literacy in the 18th and 19th century, something that could really be called "popular culture" began to emerge and multiply. It was epitomised by the sentimental romance, the Gothic horror tale, the penny-dreadful Western, the inspirational success story, popularisations of scientific and religious matters, the vast literature of self-improvement, self-help, self-education. There was inevitably some confusion as to whether certain commodities were Culture or "popular culture," especially since the novel, as a literary form, itself emerged from "popular culture" and has never disengaged itself from it. But, on the whole, it was pretty clear what was what and who was who. Nor was there much self-consciousness about the difference. One fails to find, in the 19th century, any serious concern with "popular culture" as a problem. Educated people could ignore it, when they did not surreptitiously enjoy it.

And why not? It was limited in scope, unpretentious in its manner. Most important, it was a highly moral enterprise, in ostensible intent if not always in calculated effect. It accepted the conventional canons—as established by "high culture"—of good and evil, success and failure, in order to weave its narrative around them. Whatever its offence to

intelligence and good taste, it did not represent any kind of threat to the moral and political order.

We, in contrast, are very sensitive to "popular culture" as representing just such a threat. To be more exact, we are on the defensive against "mass culture," which is what "popular culture" has become. Whereas "popular culture" was the culture of a class (the uneducated), "mass culture" is a culture shared, to a greater or lesser degree, by everyone. We all watch the same TV shows, read the same advertisements, see the same movies. As a result of the increase in popular wealth, popular taste now has a coercive power such as civilisation has never before witnessed. By its sheer massive presence, "mass culture" tends to crowd culture of any other kind to the margins of society.

One does not want to sound like a prig or a snob. Day-dreams and diversions are the stuff most people's daily lives are made of; the sentimentality, the inanity, the vulgarity of "mass culture" only become objectionable when they impose themselves upon society with such vigour as to set the tone, suggest the values, establish the context of life both private *and* public. And this is undeniably what is happening in the modern democracies.

And yet one wonders: is it that "mass culture" is so powerful, or that its opposition is so impotent? A clue is provided by the tendency—not in itself so very surprising—of "mass culture" to degenerate into pornography. Now, pornography is, or need be, a problem of no great importance; one certainly would not want to do without it entirely. But what is revealing, as concerns both pornography itself and the larger problem of mass culture, is the complete inability of the "natural" leaders of opinion in the community—the educated class in general, the intellectuals in particular—to deal with this problem.

WHAT is pornography? The fact that we ask this question in genuine puzzlement is itself a cultural phenomenon of the greatest symbolic significance. It testi-

fies to the fact that the educated class has lost its footing. And this, in turn, is connected with the fact that the educated class of to-day is not "highbrow" at all, but post-highbrow, i.e., "modern." Its difficulties in reaching firm opinions on the "mass culture" which it apprehensively confronts, derive from its kinship with it. As Leslie Fiedler has pointed out in *ENCOUNTER* (August, 1955):

It has been charged against vulgar art that it is sadistic, fetishistic, brutal, full of terror; that it pictures women with exaggeratedly full breasts and rumps, portrays death on the printed page, is often covertly homosexual, etc., etc. About these charges there are two obvious things to say. First, by and large, they are true. Second, they are also true about much of the most serious art of our time. . . . There is no count of sadism and brutality which could not be equally proved against Hemingway or Faulkner. . . . Historically, one can make quite a convincing case to prove that our highest and lowest arts come from a common antibourgeois source . . . ; and there is a direct line from Hemingway to O'Hara to Dashiell Hammett to Raymond Chandler to Mickey Spillane.

The educated class of to-day, formed by the "modern" revolt against the "highbrow," is faced with the difficult task of rejecting pornography without repudiating itself. And the only reason this question of pornography is so provocative is that the startling lack of a ready answer makes it so.

THE PROBLEM OF DIFFERENTIATING between art and pornography has never been easy, if only because some pornographers are awfully talented. In our day, the task is well nigh impossible, and few there are (and these not necessarily the best equipped) who can face it. Thus, most members of the educated class in America will concede that pornography ought to be the object of legal sanctions. But these same people have never defined what pornography is; have never made any effort to discover such a definition; have resisted all urgings that they make such an effort. And, indeed, anyone who displays a genuine concern for the issue is regarded suspiciously as an enemy of art, an enemy of promise, an enemy of the free in spirit.

Instead of facing up to the issue, an elabor-

ate ideology of evasion has been constructed. This ideology employs various arguments, as the occasion allows, but it relies primarily on the arguments from ignorance: We do not know what pornography is, because standards of propriety and decency are always changing. We do not know what the effects of pornography are upon the consumer; it is always possible that, by the vicarious discharge of sadistic aggressions, an individual's mental health may be, if not improved, then at least maintained in equilibrium. We do not know whether comic books that glorify brutality actually make children more brutal. We do not know—oh, there is so much we do not know! Only the other day a prominent American political scientist at one of our best universities argued before the Federal Communications Commission that it should not interfere with certain "objectionable" TV programmes until a massive (and, needless to say, expensive) study had been made to determine what effects, if any, such programmes had upon children.

No one can deny that all these arguments from ignorance have an element of truth in them. The only thing wrong with them is that they are impossible to live by. As cautions, they have their merit. But as guides, they lead nowhere. What they add up to is the assertion that we can never be sure of the difference between right and wrong, good and evil. True enough; but that is not the same thing as saying there is *no* difference between right and wrong, good and evil. And if such a distinction is made, it will have a bearing upon how we operate—or allow to operate—our mass entertainment media, our journalism, our book publishing, our educational system.

BUT who is going to make this authoritative distinction? And how?

In the United States, the American Civil Liberties Union is always appearing in court to defend provocatively illustrated magazines, reeking with sadism and sly perversion, against police prosecution; its plea is that such legal action is an interference with literary freedom. And when the prosecuting

attorney denies that these sheets can be regarded as literature at all, the ACLU retorts (and I quote): "It is submitted, however, that any differences are those of taste." And it goes without saying that *de gustibus non . . .* etc. The net result is that the laws against pornography in the United States are enforced in an utterly capricious manner. Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County* is banned in New York State; *Playboy* circulates freely. This is what is bound to happen when the definition of "literature" is something that literary men, as a matter of æsthetic and political principle, refuse to essay.

Here we return to that central fact of the modern cultural situation: the destruction of the older "highbrow" élite whose declared purpose, and recognised function, was to "maintain standards." To some extent this élite was robbed of its authority by the rise of the "scientific expert" as the authoritative figure, in place of the "educated man." And the scientist naturally has a scepticism towards standards in general, emphasising their "relative" nature. But mainly it was overthrown by the advent of "the modern" in arts and letters—a movement which denied the very legitimacy of this kind of authority, and which insisted that to be genuinely creative the artist had to be free to create his own standards, as well as his own art.

In those cases where fragments of the older élite still survive and exercise some influence (notably in England), they are regarded as figures of fun, rather ludicrous anachronisms. One has only to mention the name of Lord Reith to a London literary audience to evoke a smile—because Lord Reith, as Director-General of the BBC in its formative years, put great emphasis on "maintaining standards." His BBC was exceedingly proper and unadventurous, respectful towards constituted authority and the taboos of middle-class morals. He was, moreover, solemnly patronising of his audience. If the BBC provided a Light Programme, it was not merely because ordinary people wanted and deserved a spot of fun; the Light Programme had to be slanted in such a way that, in theory, it gently

led its listeners upwards towards the slightly more serious Home Programme; and the Home was similarly inclined towards the Third Programme, at which apex one was fortunate enough to listen to either the bland chatter of Oxford dons or learned sermons on Original Sin.

Lord Reith is gone, and his spirit only intermittently flutters over the air-waves. Instead of the stuffy Establishment of yesteryear there is Commercial Television à l'*Américaine* and a BBC television that is scarcely to be distinguished from the commercial variety. Already parents are indignant at the things their children (and, more rarely, themselves) are exposed to. A huge (and expensive) study by the Nuffield Foundation of the effects of TV on children came up with no definite conclusions; but people do not always need a social scientist to tell them what is happening in their homes. Those same sophisticates who were irritated to death by Lord Reith and all he stood for, are now outraged by commercial television and all it stands for. But no one knows quite what to do. . . . To be sure, one can always blame America; but not, convincingly, for long.

IT IS impossible genuinely to mourn the passing of the Mandarins and Brahmins of the older "highbrow" élite. Not all the things said against them were true or fair, by a long shot. But they not only deserved their fate; they positively courted it. Their notion of defending standards came to mean, in practice, a vigilant hostility to creative talent, as against mere mimicry. Above all, they seemed unaware of the fact that young people needed something more in life than the benevolent assurance that they would soon be middle-aged. And so they ended (or are ending) their days as sullen and sneering fulminators against modern "degeneracy" as exemplified by T. S. Eliot, Picasso, Stravinsky, etc.—their only audience, ironically, the popular press.

But now that they are gone, who is to do their job? *Someone* has to be able to say, with assurance and a measure of authority, what

is culture and what is not, what is decent and what is not. There must be some group or class that is admittedly competent to decide—not without error, but more wisely than anyone else—questions of moral and cultural value. Otherwise, a necessary and vital element of order in the life of a society will be lacking.

Recently, in the United States, religious leaders, educators, and spokesmen for parents' organisations complained to the Federal Communications Commission that there was too much violence on TV. To which they received the official rejoinder that there is a great deal of violence in *Hamlet* too—and how could the United States Government lay down one rule for *Hamlet* and another for *Peter Gunn*? How could the United States Government set itself up as an arbiter of taste? This was, presumably, reserved for the advertising agencies who are the only ones to show a passionate interest in the subject.

In England, the London County Council has withdrawn the tax exemption previously granted to the London Library, a private subscription library much used (and much beloved) by scholars, writers, and educated people generally. The Council authorities declared that some people enjoyed going to the movies, others enjoyed going to a library, and why should the pleasure of one be privileged above that of the other? Why indeed? Who is going to come out and say that, as a matter of principle, people who read good books in their leisure time should be privileged as against people who go to the movies? And who, if he does say this, will be listened to?

What it comes down to is this: we seem to have manœuvred ourselves into a situation in which the men of letters, the "intellectual" class, jealous of their own hard-won freedom from previous restrictions and suspicious of the state's meddling with questions of art, have made it extremely difficult for society as a whole to give official recognition to *Hamlet* as against, say, *Headquarters Detective*. Such instances of official recognition do exist, to be sure. But most of them go back

some years, and are survivals rather than precedents.

NOT ONLY IS THERE NO class of people which can be regarded as both representing and forming "public opinion" on matters of culture. The very idea that such a class *might* exist is fast becoming nebulous. For instance, a prominent American sociologist, until recently a dean in a major university, conducted a study of American reading habits, and arrived at the following conclusions:

Not only does the frequency of book-reading vary markedly, it is also unevenly distributed among the constituent groups of the community. For a variety of reasons some kinds of people read a great deal more and some not much. The major factor which differentiates readers from non-readers in research to date is education—in the limited sense of number of years of formal schooling. The more years of schooling the individual has, the more likely he is to read books. In one national survey only twelve per cent of the college-educated had not read a book in the preceding year as against seventy-five per cent of those with only grammar school education or less.

Now, this might mean several things. It might mean that additional schooling has improved the individual's basic reading skills, or that it has developed his reading habits, or that it has produced in him the types of interests which are ordinarily satisfied by books, or even that the people who go on to further schooling already have a reading disposition which formal education only reinforces.

The ignorance is feigned, one knows. Our sociologist is not really puzzled as to why educated people read more books than non-educated people. He simply believes that he *ought* to be puzzled—and that is what is really interesting. For what it means is that the very existence of "culture" in the traditional sense of the term, the very idea of "the cultivated man," is but dimly apprehended. In place of a prescriptive definition of "culture" we have an anthropological-sociological one. "Culture" is whatever people do—some employ "reading skills" directed towards books, others presumably employ "viewing skills" directed towards TV; and the empirical fact that "reading skills" seem to be connected with education is a statistical correlation that needs further research to be explained.

Ludicrous as this is, it is but a *reductio ad absurdum* of a recognisable tendency, within all the Western democracies, for education—even higher education—to divorce itself from the task of forming character, habits, and tastes. Sometimes this is done candidly in the name of vocational training. At other times it proceeds under the guise of allowing “free development” to the students’ natural bent. The end result is the same: the disappearance of a class of people which—by virtue of being educated—shares a cultural patrimony and is accepted by the community as providing spokesmen for this patrimony.

Even in those places where it is still taken for granted that education has something to do with reading books, what is ignored is that the educated person is one who has learned how to read, enjoy, and profit from *certain kinds* of books—kinds that are defined by the cultural tradition. Future historians may yet decide that one of the crucial events of our century, perhaps decisive for its cultural and political destiny, was the gradual dissolution and abandonment of the study of the classics as the core of the school curriculum. We all know the many reasons (some of them cogent enough) why this happened. But we fail to appreciate sufficiently the extent to which it destroyed a vital constituency of any well-ordered society; and the manner in which our failure to define a new core for the educational process helped open the way to what can only be called the subversion of public morality in the democratic nations.

PUBLIC morality? The phrase sounds almost archaic. Most young people today, if asked what it meant, would probably refer vaguely to prohibitions against necking on the beach during daylight, or perhaps to the disapproval that attaches to a public official who flagrantly appropriates public funds for his private pleasure. Yet until not so very long ago, anyone who had ever given thought to the matter would have asserted, as a matter of course, that the ultimate basis of popular government was what in America was called republican morals, and in England

civic virtue. As Edmund Burke put it: “Men are qualified for civil liberty, in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their appetites; in proportion as their love of justice is above their rapacity; in proportion as their soundness and sobriety of understanding is above their vanity and presumption. . . .” Similar sentiments were expressed by Madison, Jefferson, and Washington. If Burke was no believer in popular government, it was because he placed a lower estimate on the average man’s moral capacities than did the Founding Fathers of the United States. There was no disagreement between them, however, on the fact that self-government was a distinctively moral enterprise.

This moral component of political life has, over the past decades, been depreciated. Ours is an age that is hypnotised by Impersonal Forces. We instinctively regard ourselves as their creatures, and we find our freedom in cajoling, mollifying, and humouring them. Much of our political activity can be described, without malice, as efforts to build socialism without socialists, communism without communists, democracy without democrats. Whenever we discuss the prospects for democracy in one of the new nations of Africa or Asia, we analyse the rate of economic growth, the efficiency of the civil service, the loyalty of the armed forces, the number of schools per ten thousand children, etc. We never enquire whether the people display those particular dispositions of mind and character that make popular government workable.

What are these dispositions? This is a large question, and any short answer will be inadequate. But it is not too gross an oversimplification to say that included among them must be: a veneration for the rule of law as against the rule of men; a reliance on common reason as the dominant human motive, as against superstition or passion; a sense of community that transcends class divisions and the recognition of a common good beyond individual benefits; a scrupulous use of liberties towards these ends for which those liberties were granted; a distribution of

wealth and inequalities according to principles generally accepted as legitimate; moderation in the temper of public debate and public demeanour; etc. In every historical case one can think of, these attributes have been prior and prerequisite to democratic government. When they did not exist, or where they did not exist sufficiently strongly, democratic government faltered. And if a democratic government fails to sustain and encourage them, it is undermining its own foundations.

For, in the end, democratic government is governed by reasonable public opinion. And reasonable public opinion is not merely one that may be "well-informed" on matters within its comprehension and relevant to its judgment. It is, by definition and above all, an opinion that *wants* to be reasonable and truthful. This is the moral fundament of democracy; and it is this moral fundament that is under constant assault by much of that "mass culture" which is now being distributed through the mass media.

TAKE advertising, for instance, which plays so dominant a role in modern life that large numbers of people cannot bring themselves to read a magazine or watch a TV show that is not adorned with the familiar ads—they feel it is not really directed at them, that there is something "queer" about it. The bulk of advertising consists of lies, spiced with half-truths. The advertiser knows this; the advertising agencies know it; the consumers know it; the toddling infants know it. The "advertising game" is quite literally that—an effort to sell commodities by producing the most attractive, the most ingenious, the most beguiling hokum. Since everyone understands it is hokum, there is little substance to the nightmarish dread, evoked by some writers, of a society eventually to be ruled by a self-appointed élite of "hidden persuaders." The importation of advertising techniques into political campaigns is a disaster, not because they will produce a political Svengali, not because they play upon credulity, but because they create a universal disbelief and cynicism.

Political rhetoric is debauched; the statesman's plea becomes indistinguishable from the huckster's "pitch;" persuasion merges into demagoguery—and is calmly accepted as indispensable to "politics."

Another instance: popular journalism. We are all well aware that a large section of the popular press makes no effort to report the news honestly. Frequently this is a result of political bias; more frequently it flows from a knowledge of what will capture the interest and titillate the prejudices of its readers. This phenomenon is now so common as to seem unremarkable—it is accepted as part of the democratic scheme of things and is shrugged off with an expression of "democratic faith:" in a free competition between truth and falsehood for dominion over the minds of men, truth will eventually win out.

Yet no sensible man, contemplating the history of the human race, could seriously claim that truth always prevails over falsehood. And it is interesting to observe that this was *not* the claim of those who founded and formulated the philosophy of liberal democracy. What they said was that in a free competition between truth and *error*, the victory would finally be on the side of truth. The difference is by no means negligible. It is possible for truth to debate with error, to define itself in the very process of this debate, and for public opinion to be enlightened by the spectacle. But deliberate and cynical falsehood does not merely controvert truth; it challenges the idea which is at the heart of popular government: that the recognition of truth is not only a human but also a civic obligation. There is no such thing as a democratic right to lie, or a democratic freedom to lie. Such a liberty is reserved for a despotic society, whose State has its reasons that the citizen knoweth not. In contrast, democracy has an organic relation to enlightenment and truth.

Yet it is just this relation which is now being cavalierly discarded. Thus, Mr. Francis Williams, an experienced and eminent British journalist on the Left, has made a distinction (ENCOUNTER, February 1960) between "serious" and "mass circulation" news-

papers, allocating to the former the business of "informing and persuading public opinion" and to the latter the task of "expressing the emotions—and often no doubt the prejudice, ignorance, and silliness—of its readers." This is an entirely novel conception of the function of a free press, and it implies an entirely novel conception of democracy as that system of society which allows people to give the freest expression to their emotions, their ignorance, their silliness. It is doubtful that such a society could exist; but it is certain that (a) no rational argument could be made in its defence, and (b) no popular government could long survive in it.

IT is often said that "mass culture" is the price we pay for democracy. That all depends, of course, on what we mean by democracy.

If we mean by democracy nothing more than government which is freely consented to by the people, then this may well be so. In that case, one can either deny that "mass culture" poses any problem at all, and attribute our unease to the influence of "pre-democratic" standards of taste and culture upon our laggard imaginations; or one can seek reassurance in the belief that "mass culture" is only a passing phase of democratic evolution, and that in due course of time the level of popular taste and judgment will rise to nobler heights. Both alternatives involve an act of faith in The People, resting on the premise that what emerges from them is necessarily good and/or necessarily self-correcting.

This may be called the Populist religion of democracy, and there is no question but that it is the most common in our day. This can be seen from the frequency with which our publicists and statesmen make appeal to "the democratic faith" and "the democratic creed" as against other faiths and creeds, notably Communism. It is also interesting to observe that when the advertising and television industries feel the need to perform acts of "public service" they conceive of their mission as "selling" this democratic faith to all and sundry.

Like all political religions, this one is relatively invulnerable to rational examination and critique. But, again like all political religions, it has to face the test of reality. And the reality seems to be that this idea of popular government, in so far as it is most loyally put into practice, has a tendency to become unpopular—there is certainly more open dissatisfaction with "the democratic faith" in America to-day than there was fifty years ago, when the barest hint of scepticism was tantamount to treason. Nor is there anything paradoxical about this state of affairs; it simply reflects the fact that what people want (or think they want) is not inevitably identical with—and may even contradict—what they need (*i.e.*, what will truly satisfy them).

But this is not the only conception of democracy. And though it is now sovereign as an ideology, it is not the idea on which democracy in America and Britain was founded and which, to a greater or lesser degree, still rules the actual operations of government. That this is so in the United States is demonstrable by pointing to the existence of the Supreme Court—nine judges, appointed for life, with the power to nullify legislation (no matter how popular) that, in their considered opinion, is "unconstitutional" (a concept more vague than precise). There can be no doubt that, were a constitutional convention to be held to-day, no such thing as a Supreme Court could be set up—it would be regarded as flagrantly "undemocratic." (In those newer nations of Africa and Asia which have patterned themselves after the American system, either there is no such court or its powers are more formal than real.) Yet the Supreme Court, as originally established, has become an almost sacred institution, with which no politician dares tamper. In part, this is the sanctity that comes naturally with age. But in larger part, it is a tacit recognition that democratic government is something more than government that is popular in its origin: it is government that seeks justice as its aim.

It might be said that this is not a unique characteristic of democratic government, but is rather claimed by governments of all kinds.

And it is indeed so. What this emphasises is merely that democracy is not a self-justifying system of government; that it is not divinely ordained, any more than absolute monarchy is; and that the problem of reconciling popular government with good government is a very real one.

And it is when one takes this problem seriously that one must take "mass culture" seriously. We have more evidence than we need or like that popular government can be oppressive, capricious, inadequate to its responsibilities. We have abundant testimony, too, to the truth that institutional safeguards, needed as they are, are not sufficient by themselves to protect a people against its own imprudence, its own passions. For these institutions cannot work unless they are respected, unless their legitimacy is freely acknowledged. And such respect and acknowledgment can only come from a people whose moral sense is sufficiently firm to know, not only that right and wrong exist, but that the distinguishing between them is not something they can achieve instinctively and unaided.

In the measure that people are encouraged to believe that what they want coincides with what they ought to want; in the measure that the mass media conceives it as its function to pander to "the prejudice, ignorance, and silliness" of its audience—in just such a measure is the moral fibre of democracy corrupted.

APOLOGISTS for the crudities of "mass culture" are fond of pointing out that it is really nothing new—that the favourite sport of the English people, until it was abolished by law in 1835, was bear-baiting. Quite true. But what is overlooked is that, before 1835, there was hardly a thoughtful man who believed the mass of the English

people to be ready for self-government by universal suffrage. This is not because (as our text-books say) the very idea of democracy was novel and unfamiliar. Any educated person of that day knew a great deal about Periclean Athens and the Greek city-state. What he could not see was any resemblance between the Athenians who took part in popular assemblies and the Englishmen who took part in bear-baiting.

According to the Greek philosophers, the virtuous man was the man who exercised "self-government" over himself—over his passions, his impulses, his prejudices, his reasonings. Without such self-government in the individual, there could be no self-government in the state. Modern popular government is, of course, necessarily different from the Greek version. It involves large and representative republics rather than small and direct democracies. Only a utopian could expect virtuous men to be counted in the millions and tens of millions; the very difficulty of educating such a large number precludes it. But it is not utopian—or at least was not thought so by the thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries who fathered the democratic idea—to believe that even such large numbers, suitably enlightened by instruction and example, could attain to a general level of decency and responsibility that allowed (though it could not, naturally, guarantee) virtuous and wise leadership to be exercised over them.

Whether such leadership will be forthcoming is the critical question that faces modern democracy. We know perhaps too well that democracy is government of, by, and for the people. What we need to remember is that, according to Thomas Jefferson, democracy was also a system in which "the natural aristocracy" of talent and virtue would find its most perfect fulfilment and satisfaction.

Robert Holles

Death of a Magazine

The End of "John Bull"

THE passing of *John Bull*, aged 54 years, into the limbo of copyright magazine titles which nobody wants to use, did not arouse any great shout of sorrow, pain, or mortification. Perhaps it is because of the way a magazine dies nowadays. Quite often it will suddenly collapse in mid-serial. The next part of the serial is carried over, for the benefit of the late magazine's readers, into the magazine in which it has been "incorporated." The corpse will be carried, for a short season, on the front page of its successor.

In recent times *John Bull* itself was a regular attendant at similar funerals. In October, 1958, its front page carried *Illustrated*, an old stable companion, to the cemetery. Six months later the title rights to *Everybody's* were purchased from Fleetway for a reputed £25,000, just in time to see that upstart to the grave. On each occasion about half the readerships of the defunct publications came over, did not like what they saw, and drifted away within a month or two leaving the *John Bull* circulation hovering around the precarious million.

That the chief pall-bearer should now be given a similar kind of carpet-slippered burial seems an incongruous shift of fate. It is that and more. The demise of *John Bull* marks the end, at least for the time being, of a whole genre of general weekly magazines. It is a little alarming to reflect that in the last fifteen years all the popular "middlebrow" periodicals in the country have failed. We are left with a magazine and Sunday newspaper coverage which presupposes that the population is composed of ten per cent articulate egghead and sixty per cent sniggering halfwit, with a balance of women who are obsessed with frustrated romance and the latest knitting patterns.

The fall of *Picture Post* and *Illustrated* might

have been predicted after commercial television had become established—yet France's *Paris Match* continues to flourish in face of similar competition. In the United States a whole range of national magazines, headed by the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Life*, enjoy immense popularity without ever seeming to descend to the dreary triviality-and-sensationalism compound which is fast becoming the norm over here.

SEVERAL reasons have become current in journalistic and publishing circles for the remarkable failure of general magazines in Britain. "Television" is one of the principal whipping-boys. It is true that the advent of commercial television caused a famine in magazine advertising which posed serious financial problems for *John Bull* and its contemporaries; but in the past year the situation has shown signs of easing. Another popular reason runs as follows: in Britain, like it or not, we have a public which reads more newspapers than any other nation. Due to the small size of the country and the excellence of its communications, people get their newspapers easily and rapidly and tend to read them to the exclusion of magazines. In America conditions are exactly the reverse. There is also a theory that in Britain to-day there is a large and inexplicable gap between the readership of such publications as *Weekend* and *The People*, and that of the *Sunday Times*. This assumption—that there is nothing in the middle—has always seemed to be a dangerous one. It provides the perfect ready-to-wear excuse for cutting a slice a little further down the cone of public taste.

Whether, in fact, the general magazine market has been killed by accountants, or squeezed out of existence by newspapers, women's magazines,